



FEATURE

'The Militarised Yatra': A tool to claim land and resources, notes an environmental fact-finder



By **Bilal Handoo**

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It was supposed to be an environmental study to map the impact of religious tourism. But it soon unravelled the different realities of the annual Amarnath Yatra in Kashmir. As the long-winded research concluded, it was publicized how the Hindu pilgrimage in the Muslim-

dominated Valley has become a 'faithful' tool for Indian corporates, rightwingers and authorities to facilitate the Hindu agenda and change demography of Kashmir with the help of the Shri Amarnath Yatra Shrine Board (SASB).

The call for the 'yatra scrutiny' came in 2014 when a friend from Jammu and Kashmir Coalition of Civil Society (JKCCS) informed Swathi Seshadri, a Bengaluru-based research coordinator of Equitable Tourism Options (Equations), about the environmental implications of Amarnath Yatra. Although Swathi's company studies tourism and its environmental impacts, but studying religious tourism linked with Amarnath Yatra was an "alien activity" for her research organisation.

But they decided to study its impact, given how Amarnath Yatra is taking place on the mountains, deep inside forests and ecologically fragile zones. The idea was to tackle the waste generated by the religious tourism.



"Religious tourism is the second most popular reason for people to travel," says Swathi, an expressive woman in her mid-thirties. And the only way to break the ice was to visit the spot.

In 2014, her team disguised as yatris took the Pahalgam route and came back from the Baltal thoroughfare. Open defecation into the river, heaps of garbage and lot of plastic and tetra-packs around shocked the joint team of Equations and JKCCS.

They could sense how multiple layers are involved in the pilgrimage. “Problem was, if you touch one, you have to talk about the other, everything is interconnected,” she says. “Like, for instance, so much of garbage is present there obviously because of so many yatris.” But such huge number wasn’t always the case.

A little fact-finding revealed that a sudden spurt happened from 1996 onwards when certain “religion-driven” decisions were taken. One such decision converted the 15-day traditional yatra attended by a few thousand *faithful* into the 50-odd day affair by lakhs. Behind such a decision was the blatant body: the SASB, which was at the centre of the storm in 2008 over a controversial land deal.

Institutionalised in 2001, the SASB is a statutory-independent board headed by the Governor. “It functions as a State within the State,” Swati says, “without any accountability and few regulatory checks on its wide and arbitrary exercise of powers.”

All these findings surfaced in spring this year in the form of a 208-page report, **Amarnath Yatra: A Militarised Pilgrimage**. The joint team called it a documentation of all facets of the annual yatra fraught with controversies and conflicts. The pilgrimage, the report reveals, is receiving State patronage. Within hours of its release in Srinagar, the report triggered a storm with the Hindu rightwing outfits like Vishva Hindu Parishad and Bajrang Dal strongly objecting

to its contents.

But the protest hardly dithered Swati and her team to assert how the yatra underlines the undemocratic functioning of Indian rule in Kashmir and draws attention to issues of militarization, communal conflicts, resource monopolisation, and ecological devastation.

The report concludes that the Yatra is really being conducted on the might of the Indian armed forces along with socio-religious and langar organisations mobilising people to participate. “We believe that each of these aspects may be further studied for nuances which will also throw light on how religious tourism/ pilgrimages are being used by the State to exercise control in areas that are in conflict with the State,” the report underlines.

In a candid chat with the *FreePressKashmir*’s Features Editor, **Swathi Seshadri** shares some intriguing episodes she encountered during her field-trip and fact-finding exercise.

‘Bam Bam Bhole...’

It wasn’t a pre-planned study on our part, but came out of exploration. The year we went to study the yatra, there was a flare up at Baltal between tent and ‘langar’ owners. Upon inquiring, we came to know that a perpetual tension exists between them. Similar tensions exist between Indian forces and Kashmiri stakeholders of this yatra.

But we were shocked to spot a busload of yattris, chanting, “*Hindustan mein rehna hai... tou Bam Bam Bhole kehna hai!*” (If you have to live in India, then you must chant *Bam Bam Bhole*)”

This was odd. I have been to so many yatras across India and no where such slogans are being raised. They were tad provocative to whip up the passions. Where was that coming from? We could never know straight away. I mean, there were supposed to be *yattris* at the end of the day and not any political supporters.

While our team was going about this yatra study, someone from the pilgrimage group shouted at us, “Why aren’t you responding to the slogans?” That was brash, brazen and bizarre. We felt as if something was thrown at us and on other *yatris* who wanted to go about this pilgrimage quite peacefully.

It was very forcible and assertive on the part of those vocal ‘*yatris*’. Again, the question, ‘where is this coming from?’ set us thinking.

‘Abusing Kashmiris is no abuse’

At one base camp, we saw an old Kashmiri man giving water to the *yatris*. People in a queue were patiently waiting for their turn. But some *yatris* turned impatient and started abusing that Kashmiri man. I intervened, ‘what is this hurry, *bhaiya*! Isn’t this poor man already giving water to the people here? Why abuse him?’ But the man said, ‘It’s not an abuse for such people.’

But, it was an abuse, which hardly agitated that Kashmiri man.

All these incidents made us believe that there’s a deeper story about this *yatra* beyond the melting glaciers. For instance, Lidder is being polluted right under the nose of the district administration. No effort is being made to stop this pollution or discipline the pilgrims. But once we came to know how even the district administration is very much at the hands of the Shrine Board, the apathy made complete sense to us.

The administration only implements what is decided somewhere else.

Then, the focus area changed

Now, Amarnath Yatra was no longer an environmental study for us. It had become a big political canvas to explore. We made a list of the players—Shrine Board, district administration, tents and pony wallas, shopkeepers and others—and sought appointments to have a word with them.

We particularly met traders and hoteliers of the twin health resorts, Pahalgam and Sonmarg. They told us how their business slumps during the yatra period [the peak summer season], as *yatris* don’t really buy anything from them.

We also met people in other states involved in this *yatra* and filed RTIs to get our facts straight. We made six visits to the Valley to take everyone’s inputs. For over two years, we collected data in a very systematic, extensive way. We really want it a rationally argued report.

A doctor and his ‘deadly’ yatra diagnosis

We met a doctor in Pahalgam. He told us that soon after the *yatra*, there is a sudden spike in water-borne diseases—especially diarrhoea and Hepatitis B—in the catchment area of Pahalgam. Even locals told us how they are increasingly falling sick to the twin diseases.

The rightwing Hindu element

Although this isn't an attempt to club the *faithful* with vested interests, but the fact remains that provocative slogans are being pitched and people masquerading as *yatris* do participate in it, for they believe that they are contributing to some 'national integration' cause by reducing extremism.

Rightwing Hindu outfits like Bajrang Dal and VHP are continuously increasing the popularity of the Yatra in lieu with NGOs running langars. All these actions might not have a direct state sanction, but since these people manage to show up makes one believe that they are indirectly receiving some State support.

Two Videos and farce of the Secular State

The Shrine Board has put out two videos on its website. One talks about the mandatory health check-up of *yatris* and the other, the sanctity of *this* yatra. Now, this second video is very problematic; because here is the Shrine Board headed by the State governor underlining the sanctity of the Hindu yatra.

The head of the Secular State can't do that. And if he does, then that State ceases to be Secular.

The SASB is not supposed to do that either. It was primarily formed to check the corruption in the fund administration. But after the SASB Act was passed, it started interfering in religion, too. The act needs to be repealed, or amended bearing in mind secular and constitutional tenets. Only then, the SASB will play an implementing role with final decision making reposed with the J&K government.

Fundamental aspiration: 'claim land and resources'

We came to know during our research that the *yatra* is merely being used as a tool to claim land and resources. Otherwise going and praying in the temple is not a problem. But the moment the *yatra* becomes a state sponsored affair, it becomes a problem. With State putting all its might behind it, the *yatra* has become a glaring example of how the State oversteps in promoting something and makes it truly controversial.

We met Gujjars living between Sheeshnag and Panchtarni who told us how the vegetation has changed and glaciers finishing due to the unchecked flow of *yatris*. They used to graze their animals in those pastures. But now, they have been barred from that.

The garbage is a big menace on the yatra routes. The Shrine Board digs pits to dispose it. Smelling it, the bears come down the hills and exhume it. Then rain washes away the rotting leftover into the water body and pollutes it. This to me is catastrophic, as down those filthy routes and polluted river course, people continue to fall sick, very sick.

Why not to maintain a yatra status quo?

Even the former governor Jagmohan says in his book that State should be kept out of this. He said that in the context of Vaishno Devi Yatra which is similar to the Amarnath Yatra. So, I believe, the status quo is not impossible. But I don't think the State wants it.

Otherwise, the locals have always responded positively during the crisis. They have done it in the past by comforting, feeding and rescuing the *yatris*. And they continue to do that. On their part, the State should have demilitarised the *yatra*. But by making it a militarised pilgrimage, they only use it as a religious aggression tool.

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